

BRICE MARDEN: RU WARE, MARBLES, POLKE



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Matthew Marks Gallery

Slow Time

DAVID ANFAM

An artist's life is an intense search for truth.

BRICE MARDEN¹

I ask my mind to make one further effort, to bring back once more the fleeting sensation.

MARCEL PROUST²

In a sense, the more Brice Marden's art has changed over the years, the more it has stayed the same.³ The stasis must not be mistaken for monotony. On the contrary, Marden's media and idioms remain decidedly various. To date, the former have included oil, beeswax, and terpeneol (a type of turpentine) on canvas, linen, and stone; myriad works on paper in graphite, crayon, charcoal, ink, pastel, and gouache; collages; lithographs; etchings; and stage sets. The latter encompass spartan color fields and tangled calligraphies; rigorous geometries and vigorously gestural marks; huge dimensions and diminutive ones; and dun monochromatic as well as vividly spectral hues. This much is well known. Less easy to categorize is the implication of Marden's fixed concerns amid these changing means.

Early on, Marden summarized his aims in some much-quoted words: "An artist's life is an intense search for truth. [...] The rectangle, the plane, the picture, the structure, is but a trampoline to

bounce on spiritually.”⁴ In an age of simulation, cyberspace, the deconstruction of the self, the death of the author, post-Warholian irony, and other cultural quicksand, “truth” has often become a shopworn or fleeting entity, tending towards truthiness. Furthermore, the bouncy trampoline makes an unexpected bedfellow with the spirituality of the strict rectangle, structure, and plane. Listening to this statement, it almost sounds as though Mondrian had met Miró or Fellini. Perhaps, then, Marden’s “truth” resides somewhere between the realms of abstract spirit and earthy reality, ideal order and hands-on human feeling? If so, the truth in his paintings may reflect the kind of stability that results when opposites face each other. Simply put, from first to last Marden’s has been an art of romantic classicism, at once cool and passionate. Consequently, we might think of him as, say, a little like a latter day Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, albeit rather more hip.

Fittingly, Marden’s recent output has maintained this mix of modes, bringing his old ideas afresh into the present. The dating of *Ru Ware Project* (note how this last word indicates a sustained, even implicitly ongoing, endeavor), executed between 2007 and 2011, announces his slow work process, as though the hunt for authenticity were necessarily protracted and, *ipso facto*, involved memory. Indeed, the monochrome of this painting is one of Marden’s most established standbys, stemming from his fledgling practice in the early 1960s. New, however, is the particular point of reference in the piece’s title and choice of colors. Both allude to Ru ware (as the ceramics became known to later connoisseurs), the rarest and most highly prized of ancient Chinese pottery (only seventy-nine complete objects have survived), produced



in Ruzhou during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries for the Northern Song Dynasty's imperial court at Huizong [fig. 1].⁵ Marden became enamored of Ru ware when he saw an exhibition of it in Taipei in 2007 after his large retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York had opened. Undecorated, the iron-bearing glaze on Ru ware is thick and semi-opaque with bubbles. The soft hazy color is hard to describe, drifting as it does between pale gray and blue. Once typified as “the color of the sky after rain,”⁶ if Ru ware did not exist, it would have to be invented as an objective correlative to the famously in-between tonalities that Marden favors. Like the glazes on the Chinese ceramics, the surface of *Ru Ware Project* is the result of intense layering. (Marden, however, additionally wears down his strata.) Layers involve a temporal process and may mingle disparate elements in their apparent final unity. They are also constituents of memory.

Layers feature in another of Marden's recent paintings, *Polke Letter* (2010–11). Again, this work mixes the relatively old and the new, connecting it to *Ru Ware Project*. This is because the origin of Marden's *Letter* paintings — begun in 2006, there are ten to date⁷ — lies in the same visit to Taipei, where he was also struck by the calligraphy of an eleventh-century Song Dynasty poem displayed at the National Palace Museum. In turn, these excursions into Chinese culture take their place in a wider context in Marden's evolution, which began in 1984 when

fig. 1
Ru ware incense burner
and brush washers
Late 11th century to early 12th
century, Northern Song Dynasty
(AD 960–1127)
British Museum, London
(on loan from the Sir Percival
David Foundation of Chinese Art)
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
University, Oxford (lent by the
Sir Alan Barlow Collection Trust)

he visited the exhibition “Masters of Japanese Calligraphy: 8th–19th Century” at New York’s Asia Society Galleries and Japan House Gallery. Subsequently, this interest burgeoned into an entire nexus of paintings, drawings, and prints titled *Cold Mountain*, after the name (as it translates into English) of the near-legendary eighth- or ninth-century (Tang Dynasty) Chinese poet Han Shan. Repeatedly, Marden has injected the archaic and/or primitive into his modernist aesthetic.

The equally salient issue is that Marden’s lengthy involvement with such Far Eastern sources runs deeper than any mere chinoiserie or casual Orientalism, and is closer to the intently engaged emotional and intellectual perspectives of, for example, Ezra Pound’s *Cathay* poems and Gustav Mahler’s symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), which was also based on the writings of another Tang Dynasty poet, Li Bai. Like the very subject of Mahler’s composition, Marden’s outlook has always set great store on nature as a wellspring. Like *Das Lied von der Erde*, Marden’s art displays a consummate command of textures and tempi. At times, Mahler reduced his large orchestra to the sonic thinness of chamber music, just as the paint of *Polke Letter* is pared down to the weave of its linen. At other moments, Mahler’s music is as complexly roiling as Marden’s intricate handling of line. Both *Das Lied von der Erde* and *Polke Letter* are elegies: the former to life’s inevitable passing, the latter to the recently deceased German artist Sigmar Polke (another painter obsessed with unusual hybrid media).

But before the comparison between an early twentieth-century Viennese composer and an early twenty-first century American abstrac-

tionist goes too far, it is necessary to pull back and scan the bigger picture. To wit, the serenity and stillness of *Ru Ware Project* and the energy and emotionalism of *Polke Letter* are two sides of the same romantic coin. Put another way, Marden's credo that "Emotion is the lasting thing in art"⁸ goes hand in hand with a severity for which the dictum of another maestro of painterly grisaille, Georges Braque, offers the best definition: "I love the rule that corrects emotion."⁹ Was Braque's quiet yet ardent development of Cubist syntax romantic or classical in tenor? The answer, of course, is both. (No wonder the Frenchman frequently depicted such solo instruments as a violin, a mandolin, and a clarinet, thereby evoking their delicate notes, yet himself played rousing Beethoven symphonies on the accordion.) Such fused antitheses return us to Ingres.

In 1952 the art historian Walter Friedlaender definitively clarified any lingering confusion about Ingres's temperament *au fond*: "The archaic, the primitive, the linear-abstract, these are all attributes of a Romantic tendency. [...] Ingres's classicism was necessarily influenced in an essential way by the romantic point of view of his time. The result was a romantic classicism."¹⁰ He could have been discussing Marden — whose attraction to archaic Chinese objects and scripts has already been noted; for whom the "linear-abstract" is a fundamental stylistic tenet; and who remarked that "the evidence of the hand almost gives it [a drawing] back to a sort of primitivism."¹¹ What the "medieval" or "primitive" was to Ingres, the antique has been to Marden. They are alike artists given to tightly controlled extremes fueled by the past.¹²

The affinities go further. Consider Marden's lifelong devotion to

drawing: “I love how drawing is so close to you. It comes right out of you. My work tends to evolve from this small, direct thing [drawing] into something bigger.”¹³ Ingres would have wholeheartedly agreed with this position. He is reported to have proclaimed, “Drawing is the probity of art. To draw does not mean simply to reproduce contours; drawing does not consist merely of line: drawing is also expression, the inner form, the plane, modeling.”¹⁴ There is a foretaste here of Marden’s fidelity to his “plane image.” Likewise, when Ingres stated, “If I had to put a sign over my door, I would write ‘School of Drawing’ and I’m certain that I would create painters,” he echoed *avant la lettre* Marden’s belief that draftsmanship generates his paintings: “There’s a certain drawing that’s like the bone structure, and then another drawing lays the skin on, the skin actually being the paint.”¹⁵

In terms of their command of color, the two men appear even closer. While Marden’s admiration for his predecessors and contemporaries who had pictorially hymned the praises of gray in its many registers — among them Zurbarán, Goya, Courbet, Manet, and Giacometti — is a matter of record,¹⁶ it is easy to forget that Ingres set that color above mere colorfulness: “Better gray than garishness.” His grays are supremely sensuous. Not for nothing did Friedlaender remark that “even Ingres’s pure pencil sketches suggest his special feeling for color. His stroke is never really abstract, but retains a feeling of warmth that needs only be touched with the suggestion of atmospheric effects of color and light to come alive.”¹⁷ Throughout Marden’s oeuvre a host of muted shades accord with their counterparts in Ingres. Thus, the dusky pink in the rightward panel of his *D’après la Marquise de la Solana*

(1969) finds its match in the singular tint of the god's robe in Ingres's *Jupiter and Thetis*. So does the pale sky blue in at least four of the nine canvases¹⁸ comprising *Ru Ware Project* correspond — in pitch and silky opalescence — to the dress in Ingres's *Louise, Comtesse Othenin d'Haussonville* [fig. 2]. Similarly, the shade of Thetis's drapery is that of the greenish taupe of Marden's *Nebraska* (1966), and the shifty ash-grayed carnelian-cum-terracotta that dominates *Polke Letter* hovers somewhere between the subdued reddish damask wallpaper background of Ingres's *Jacques Marquet, Baron de Montbreton de Norvins* and the utterly idiosyncratic, suave dulled purple in front of which the lady in the Washington version of *Madame Marie-Clotilde-Inès Moitessier* poses. What Marden termed “color losing identities, becoming color”¹⁹ translates into Ingres's capacity to lend his colors a strange, autonomous vibrancy. Whether representational or abstract, historical or contemporary, an air of refined, lofty aestheticism permeates the two artists' temperaments.

A taste for pictorial compression also makes Marden heir to a romantic classical strategy begun by Jacques-Louis David and continued by Ingres.²⁰ Again Friedlaender hits the proverbial nail on the head: “David set his figures in an imaginary, bare, artificially emptied space. Ingres destroys the space and puts bodies, heads, garments, and drapery all in one almost uniform plane; in this there is, again, an approach to an ‘archaic’ style.”²¹ This is the Ingres whose compositionally compacted *Turkish Bath* would nurture the more radical steps in the same direction evident in early Cubism.²² Compression also

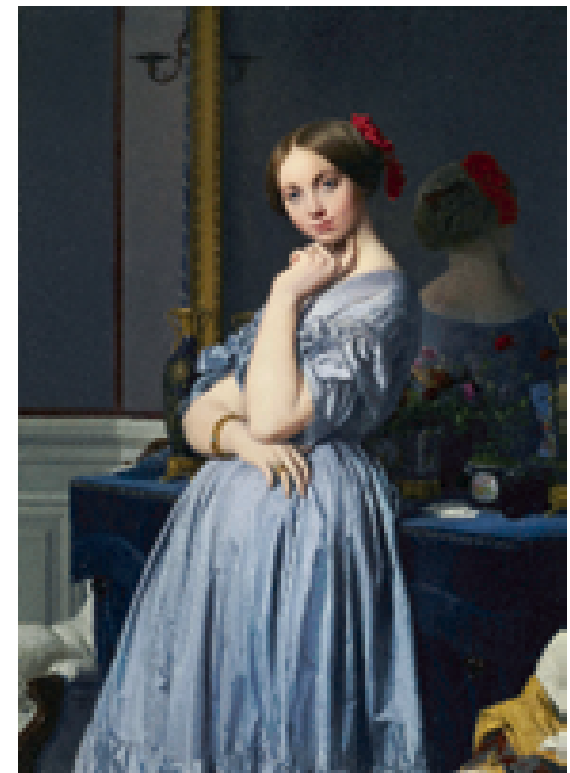


fig. 2
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
*Louise, Comtesse Othenin
d'Haussonville*, 1845
Oil on canvas
51 7/8 x 36 1/4 inches; 132 x 92 cm
The Frick Collection, New York.
Purchased by The Frick Collection,
1927

lurks in Ingres's hands in a rather different sense that seems hard to separate from repression. Its symptom is the feeling that his paintings repeatedly convey of surging color — the radiantly rose pink, ethereal blue, emerald green, and velvety black clothes of his sitters, the smolderingly subdued damask wallpapers, and the pale-gold draped furnishings — being held down by determined, even obsessively disciplined draftsmanship, itself with the slightest whiff of tamed libidinal urges.²³ Such repression anticipates the psychological-formal dynamics at play in Marden's stance: "I'm a really repressed guy; that's what this stuff is all about."²⁴ Sanding down his paintings' "skins," manipulating compressed charcoal ("it's a heavier and greasier charcoal, so you get a denser black and I could work black over blacks"),²⁵ scraping back layers with a razor (for works on paper) or a palette knife (for canvases), and applying a grid are all technical manifestations of this ascetic instinct. The flip side is Marden's titles with their sensual tug: *Virgins*, *Venus*, *Aphrodite*, *Torso of the Buddha*, *Vine*, *Pumpkin Plumb*, *Patent Leather Valentine*, and so on. The hedonist confounds the monk. Ingres contained color with line; Marden holds it in check with the planar rectangle: "Idea. Trip down from SF in plane. Hills. California hills. Compress them, flatten them to a flat plane. Painting with this in mind."²⁶ In turn, compression connotes solidification and, by implication, hints at a stilling of something that may once have been more active, whether in time or space. The nine rectangles of *Ru Ware Project* have this paradoxical fixity. Formally, they enact a serene fugue of almost Bach-like meticulousness around a single color, the mysterious chromatic note of the ceramics, shifting in degrees of saturation and

tonality — now greenish, now bluer, now nearer to beige. Expressively, they have the hushed stillness-in-movement quality that T. S. Eliot discerned, serendipitously enough, in the same class of object:

Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.²⁷

With their typically deep (2½ inch) stretchers, around the vertical sides of which the paint conspicuously extends approximately halfway in rough strokes, the *Ru Ware Project*'s panels seem suspended between geometric objecthood and a color that is greater than the sum of the individual canvases — and which, for that selfsame reason, is elusive, evoked rather than stated. There is the air of an absent, unmoved mover to the procession that these panels perform. Resolutely material, the eye nonetheless can no more pin down the chroma that *Ru Ware Project* appears to be perpetually “becoming” (to paraphrase Marden) than it can plumb the depth of the sky or the ocean. How apt that the seventeen-foot windows facing west and north in Marden's studio at Tivoli should allow him to survey a panorama of the Hudson River and the firmament above it.²⁸

Where have we encountered this odd fusion of the ideal and the empirical before? For one thing, in nineteenth-century American Luminism. Commentators on the Luminist painters have remarked that their effects seem to stop time so that the moment is locked in



fig. 3
John Frederick Kensett
Passing off of the Storm, 1872
Oil on canvas
11 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 29 x 62 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.
Gift of Thomas Kensett, 1874

place — “locked even more by a strong horizontal organization, by an almost mathematical ordering of planes in space parallel to the picture surface, and by deliberately aligned vertical and occasional diagonal accents.”²⁹ Luminism, that is to say, worshipped proleptically at the altar of “plane image.” This explains why there should be a striking yet coincidental concinnity between a Luminist vista such as John Frederick Kensett’s *Passing Off of the Storm* [fig. 3], *Ru Ware Project*, and various other paintings by Marden. It is the very palpability of light in the Kensett, allied to the fastidiously delicate surface rendering, that makes it a merger of the real and the cerebral. In short, the Luminists anticipated Marden’s synthesis of intense observational strategies (the scenery of western Nebraska, the light and landscape of Hydra, Patti Smith’s blue-black hair, the length of an ailanthus twig) with idealizing abstraction (the structure, the field, the rectangle, the plane).³⁰ Luminism imposed — as Marden seeks to do — measure and planarity upon light and spirit. Here memory re-enters the equation.

Luminism’s icons tend to have the flavor of extreme precision associated with things that are beheld through the mind’s eye (after

all, the mind organizes and abstracts what the eye perceives). The exactitude that pervades Marden's methods — the calibrated dimensions and depths of his canvases, the color of silk he might seize upon in a Zurbarán, the obsessive configuration and placement of lines — belongs to the same hierarchy. While Marden makes countless drawings *en plein air* and in front of the motif, there are just as many works, especially among the paintings — *The Seasons: Spring-Summer-Autumn-Winter* (1975) is a prime instance — that must perforce rely upon his recall of a place, a person, a thing, or a certain time. Indeed, Marden has said as much, commenting on *Summer Table* (1972–73) that “the painting started with colors that approached those colors [of two glasses of lemonade and Coca-Cola] from memory.”³¹ Memory and time are intertwined. In this respect, a nod towards an otherwise altogether remote predecessor may prove instructive. I am thinking of the Victorian William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay, Kent — A Recollection of October 5th 1858* [fig. 4].

At face value what links Dyce to Marden? One could cite their common concern with minute pictorial exactitude, a restrained glow or lambent atmosphere that seems to suffuse everything (Dyce's palette is, like many of Marden's works, basically an inflected grisaille) and which is mutable as it shifts towards yellow, violet, green, and brown without ever allowing those hues enough area and saturation to wax full-blooded. More profoundly, Dyce's scene captures, as its title indicates, a memory, and it does so with an eidetic degree of definition and concomitant attention to lineation and surface. Hence a cynic might dub the Dyce as a retrograde Marden returned, via a century and more



fig. 4
William Dyce
Pegwell Bay, Kent - a Recollection of October 5th 1858,
ca. 1859–60
Oil on canvas
25 x 35 inches; 64 x 89 cm
Tate Gallery, London. Purchased, 1894

of representationalism, to nature. A keener eye would add that Dyce dealt with the verities that have preoccupied Marden — water, sky, and stone — even down to the seashells (a motif that first fascinated the latter when he visited Thailand in 1984–85) constituting the base substance of Pegwell Bay’s chalk escarpment. A meditation on duration and matter,³² Dyce’s view scrutinizes, as Marden has done over and again, the stratifications of time — at once heavenly (the horizontal clouds and comet), human (the various ages of the figures),³³ and geological (the layered cliffs). This conjunction between color, light, time, and memory inevitably broaches another thing: namely, Marden’s especially high regard for Mark Rothko’s imageless icons.

Crudely encapsulated, the essence of Rothko’s classic canvases from 1950 onwards is their imposition of an abstract idea — the rectangle — upon manifold colors that delve the entire scale of human experience. On this score, Rothko left no stone unturned, exploring with numberless surprises brilliant radiance and somber darkness, opacity and translucency, flatness and depth, svelte uniformity and gritty

textural incident, saturation and lightness.³⁴ The Rothko Chapel in Houston holds a special place in Marden's pantheon. This prompts a personal digression and full disclosure.

As consulting curator of the large loan exhibition at the Menil Collection in 1996 that celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Rothko Chapel, one of the great privileges I enjoyed was having the opportunity to view these late penumbral canvases at all hours of the day in Renzo Piano's painstakingly lit galleries. As the filtered Texas sunlight passed from morning to sunset, so the same painting appeared to assume completely different aspects. This experience recapitulated Rothko's own predilection in later life for meditating on the pictures in his studio as the light faded towards the end of the day. Marden's comments on the 1996 exhibition are pertinent; they not only speak to his admiration for Rothko's achievement but also enlarge our understanding of his ongoing handling of luminosity and shade. "It was kind of 'Now you see it, now you don't,'" said Marden. "Things that he [Rothko] would have going on in those dark areas disappear, though they're there and are having an effect. You can't perceive the color at first, then when you do, it's incredibly beautiful. Also, the surfaces become very hard and reflective."³⁵ *Mutatis mutandis*, the facture of *Ru Ware Project* has a certain shell-like resilience and reflectance, whereas that of *Polke Letter* is matte, porous, abraded, and almost friable. As such, it adverts to another type of Rothko canvas, epitomized by a 1953 exemplar [fig. 5].³⁶

Rothko's moody composition is a shadowlands, dense with obscurity while nevertheless very thinly rendered. There are even extensive



fig. 5
Mark Rothko
Untitled (Purple, White and Red), 1953
Oil on canvas
77 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 81 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; 198 x 208 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift
of Sigmund E. Edelstone, 1983.509

passages where Rothko rubbed down his tinted washes with a cloth or similar device, leaving ghostly *pentimenti*, in a process that prefigures Marden's analogous methods.³⁷ Above all, the chromatic gamut is singular — effectively a fugal inflection of the basic gray ground towards (reading the rectangles respectively from the top) bluish purple, ivory white, dusky maroon. *Polke Letter's* wafer-thin makeup, obscurities, and inimitable rusty plum-

tinted field are at some deep level heir to Rothko's idiosyncratic colorism. The joint testimonies of each artist corroborate this accord. Rothko wrote, "I use colors that have already been experienced thru the light of day and thr[u] the states of mind of the total man. In other words my colors are not colors that are laboratory tools which is [*sic*] isolated from all accidental impurities so that they have a specified identity or purity."³⁸ Chiming with Rothko, as it were, we will recall that Marden spoke of "color losing identities, becoming color." Just as it is impossible to pinpoint the exact hues in Rothko's *Untitled*, which resemble those seen when we close our eyelids,³⁹ so Marden expresses his interest in "the strangest gray I have ever made" and in "putting on a gray [...] that under certain conditions shows up green, so you aren't sure about the color at all."⁴⁰ For both painters, color shifts subliminally between the noumenal and the phenomenal, presence and erasure.

Lastly, the rectangles that Rothko imposed on his vaporous tonalities to contain them within an ironclad frontal plane, which he likened

to “facades” (constructs that commonly tend to possess some sort of rectilinear design or coordinates), have an inverted correspondence with the structuring that underlies Marden’s *Letters*. At their outset, the *Letters* evince a network of glyphs and lines similar to what remains visible in his calligraphic drawings [fig. 6]. Subsequently this grid of signs is scraped away and overpainted with a “first” (actually consequent upon the true first markings) ground layer, then additional campaigns move towards the eventual palimpsest that results in the appearance of the finished *Letters*.⁴¹ So whereas Rothko trapped his chromatic expanses within a final orthogonal scheme, Marden emancipates the gridded arrangements with which the *Letters* begin into an ensuing freewheeling, sinuous labyrinth. Insofar as this curvaceous linear tracery prompts manifest associations with bodies and motion (the dancers, swaying attendants, bulky bears, and so on that populate Marden’s titles and imaginative models)⁴² and springs from calligraphic improvisation, it has an antecedent in the work of another Abstract Expressionist whom Marden reveres: Jackson Pollock.



Although it would be foolish to make an overt linkage between *Polke Letter* and any single painting by Pollock, his *Stenographic Figure* [fig. 7] is the *locus classicus* for the superimposition of calligraphy upon the outspread human body figured as a pattern of flowing energy. Characteristically, Pollock’s runes lie mostly on top of the schematic female anatomy, while Marden’s equivalent traces linger materially below. Nor need we search further afield than Abstract Expressionism

fig. 6
Brice Marden
Forgery, 2007–08
Kremer ink on Lanaquarelle paper
22 ½ x 30 inches; 57 x 76 cm
Private collection, Dallas



fig. 7
Jackson Pollock
Stenographic Figure, 1942
Oil on linen
40 x 56 inches; 102 x 142 cm
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Mr. and Mrs.
Walter Bareiss Fund

to witness a precedent for Marden's fictive/illegible scripts. In Adolph Gottlieb's *Pictographs* and such sculptures by David Smith as *The Letter* [fig. 8], indecipherable alphabets and hieroglyphics summon the look of writing, as Marden often manages to do so graphically yet without conveying any readable message.⁴³ That Smith should have aligned his glyphs according to a grid plan conforms to an immemorial human tendency to position writing, partly because it is inherently systematic, according to linear principles. (For instance, even the earliest of all Sumerian clay tablets dating from circa 3,300 already aligns its marks in regular columns.)⁴⁴ Writing is a means to record experience and thought. Consequently it is the handmaiden of memory and charged with temporality.⁴⁵ Because there is an age-old propensity, stretching back at least to ancient Greece and Aristotle, to figure the mind as flat or planar, the art of memory has long been likened to an inner writing.⁴⁶ Pollock's famous phrase that his technique entailed "memories arrested in space"⁴⁷ can be understood as his attempt to render inner sentience, ergo time, in the atemporal medium of paint

on canvas. Triangulating time, the grid, and glyphs leads to the third and final grouping in Marden's recent activity: the paintings on marble.

The marble paintings have a clear provenance. During the summer of 1981 Marden's wife Helen hired some local workmen to build a marble bench for the garden of their residence in Hydra. Noticing the leftover fragments strewn about the place, the artist decided to paint on them. He continued this process for the next six years, then broke off. In a typical cyclical move, he resumed the undertaking in 2011. It is customary to observe that the stones' irregular shapes loosened the orthogonal ordonnance that controlled Marden's canvases.⁴⁸ This is true: the latest group of marbles develop the diagonals present in the first batch with increasing freedom. In *Joined* (all marble works mentioned here are from 2011) two graphite vectors run at a tangent to each other; in *Years* the upper broken edge of the stone is itself a splintered diagonal; and in *#10* the exceptionally trued rectangular format contains on its left side the suggestion of a truncated trapezoid. However, the germ from which these diagonals sprang occurs even further back in Marden's career — the diagonals that arose from joining the corners of the grid network in *Untitled #1* (1973) [fig. 9]. The shading within this ink drawing reprises how early Cubism and particularly Mondrian in his serial compositions of circa 1912–15 imposed a (conceptual) grid upon the (natural) world of trees, buildings, and the sea. The recent “stones” (so to speak) mirror this imposition, placing straight lines and chromatic planes in

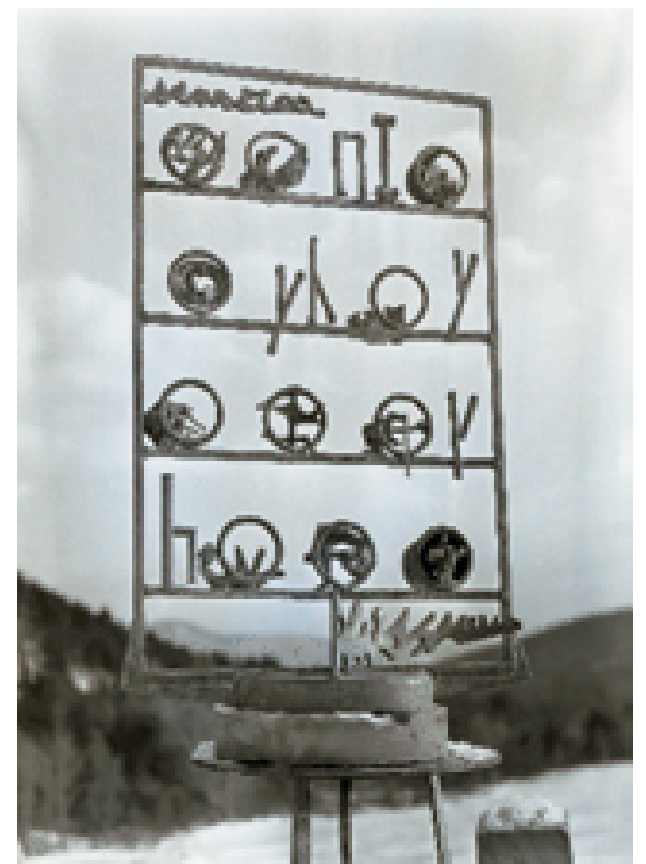


fig. 8
David Smith
The Letter, 1950
Welded steel
37 1/2 x 25 x 12 inches;
95 x 63.5 x 30.5 cm
Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts
Institute, Museum of Art, Utica,
NY. Museum purchase, 51.37

primary colors (plus black, white, and green) upon the irregularly shaped supports with their veining and blotches. (Most of the stone is a black and white marble from Naxos.) Sometimes they suggest Mondrian's signature manner re-projected onto unruly nature. In other

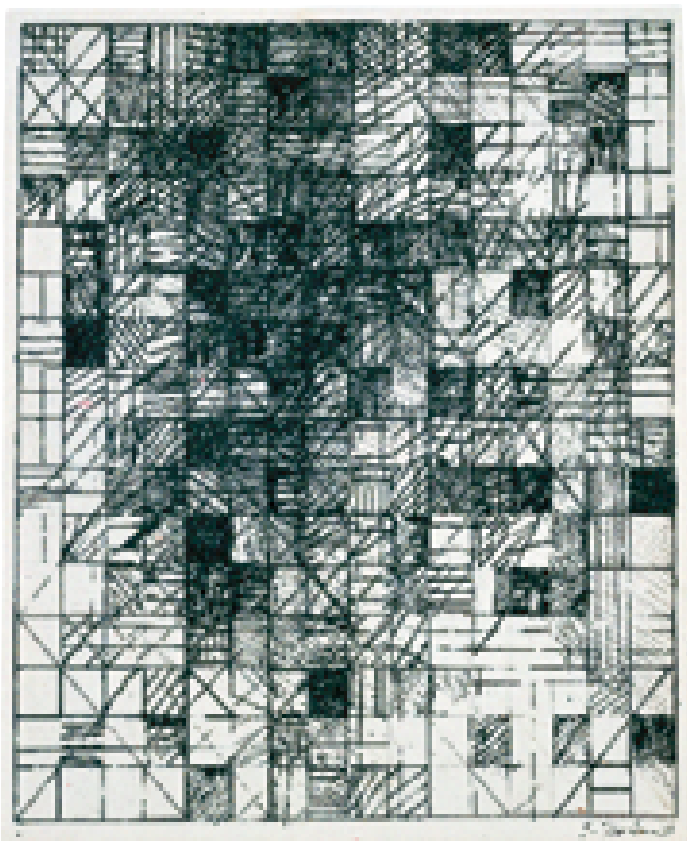


fig. 9
Brice Marden
Untitled #1, 1973
Ink on paper
14 ½ x 12; 37 x 30 cm
Collection of the artist

instances, for example the two *Chinese Landscapes*, the affinity is more with the geological phenomenon whereby representational likenesses seem to gel in the accidental patterning and veins found in stone, such as the so-called “ruin marble” found on the banks of the river Arno (*pietra albarese*), Chinese dreamstones, and the same country's fantastically shaped *lingbi* and *gongshi* rocks that Marden prizes.⁴⁹ Greece meets the Far East. Certainly, *opera di mano* — to invoke an apposite distinction deriving from Renaissance architectural theory — here impresses itself on *opera di natura*.⁵⁰ What Marden's hand limns with relative brevity — in effect, fleeting though measured painterly interven-

tions upon *objets trouvés* or natural readymades (remember that he was once Robert Rauschenberg's assistant) — laminates a substance laden with temporality. In a nutshell, stone concretizes terrestrial time, registering in its variegations and amassed strata well-nigh unfathomable spans of slow geological change.⁵¹ It is lithic memory.

The other intriguing feature of the painted marbles is their relation to architecture. Firstly, during the period of the initial “stones,” Marden was also engaged in the early 1980s on a project to create stained glass windows for Basel Cathedral. The paintings and studies

stemming from that commission exploited the diagonal's possibilities to the full: "When I was doing the windows, in order to have meetings between the threes and fours, I started using diagonals. [...] Suddenly there's perspective, a completely different kind of space."⁵² In light of this notion, a case exists for arguing that the "stones" of 2011 encompass thoughts hatched over two decades before. Moreover, the space in them is *redivivus*. Pigment extends around some of the sides, emphasizing a tinted sedimentary depth. *View* is just what its title says: an abstracted Mediterranean vista in which blue, yellow, and red stand proxy for serried mountains plunging down to a silver sea beneath a wine-dark sky.⁵³ *Pietra dura* transfigured. The attenuated vertical *Chinese Landscapes* suggest their subject glimpsed perhaps through the aperture of a narrow window. (It would be a nice conceit to make the empty space surrounding the slab stand for the positive periphery of an embrasure.) Alternatively, in *Swirl*, #3, and other slabs the chance black intrusions within the otherwise pristine marble interact with Marden's pigment washes to precipitate a play of light and shade, stability and flux — abrupt swirling or gently drifting ciphers that bring to mind lines by W. B. Yeats:

Another emblem there! That stormy white
 But seems a concentration of the sky;
 And, like the soul, it sails into the sight
 And in the morning's gone, no man knows why;
 And is so lovely that it sets to right
 What knowledge or its lack had set awry,

So arrogantly pure, a child might think
It can be murdered with a spot of ink.⁵⁴

How Marden pictorially constructs the “stones” also has an architectonic touch about it, not to mention the fact that the rectangles in *Years 3* approximate rudimentary flagstones, while the angles that the graphite traces have the look of ground plans for structures unknown and perhaps never to be raised.⁵⁵ Remember that a glyph, apart from being a sculptured mark or symbol, also designates a groove or channel, especially in the Doric frieze. Maybe tinges of the Doric mode’s celebrated severity inform the most austere of the “stones,” such as *Helen’s Immediately*. If so, this again resonates back to one of Marden’s earliest interests — in walls. Living temporarily in Paris in the spring and summer of 1964, Marden encountered André Malraux’s dramatic cleanup of the city’s buildings: “They were re-plastering or stuccoing a lot of the walls. And I would just spend an afternoon watching them work down these walls. And then when I got back to New York — there were paintings that I had started at Yale, and then I just sort of reworked them, and they became more [...] field-like.”⁵⁶ Marden’s interest in antique frescoed interiors (Knossos, Pompeii, etc.) is also well known. Such murals were done on plaster into which the design was incised with a stylus, then colored. Marden neatly reversed this procedure: the coloration on the stones comes first, followed by the defining graphite lines.⁵⁷ Attending to the connection with frescoes in turn puts a different spin on the “field-like” minimalism of *Helen’s Immediately* and *For Blinky*. If they look as modern as



Brice Marden's studio on the
Greek island of Hydra, 2011

Blinky Palermo's abstractions and American Color Field art (including Marden's unique version of it) of the 1970s, another sightline might compare them to the tomb frescoes of Paestum [fig. 10]. Nor can it be forgotten that, by painting the stones, Marden turned them into

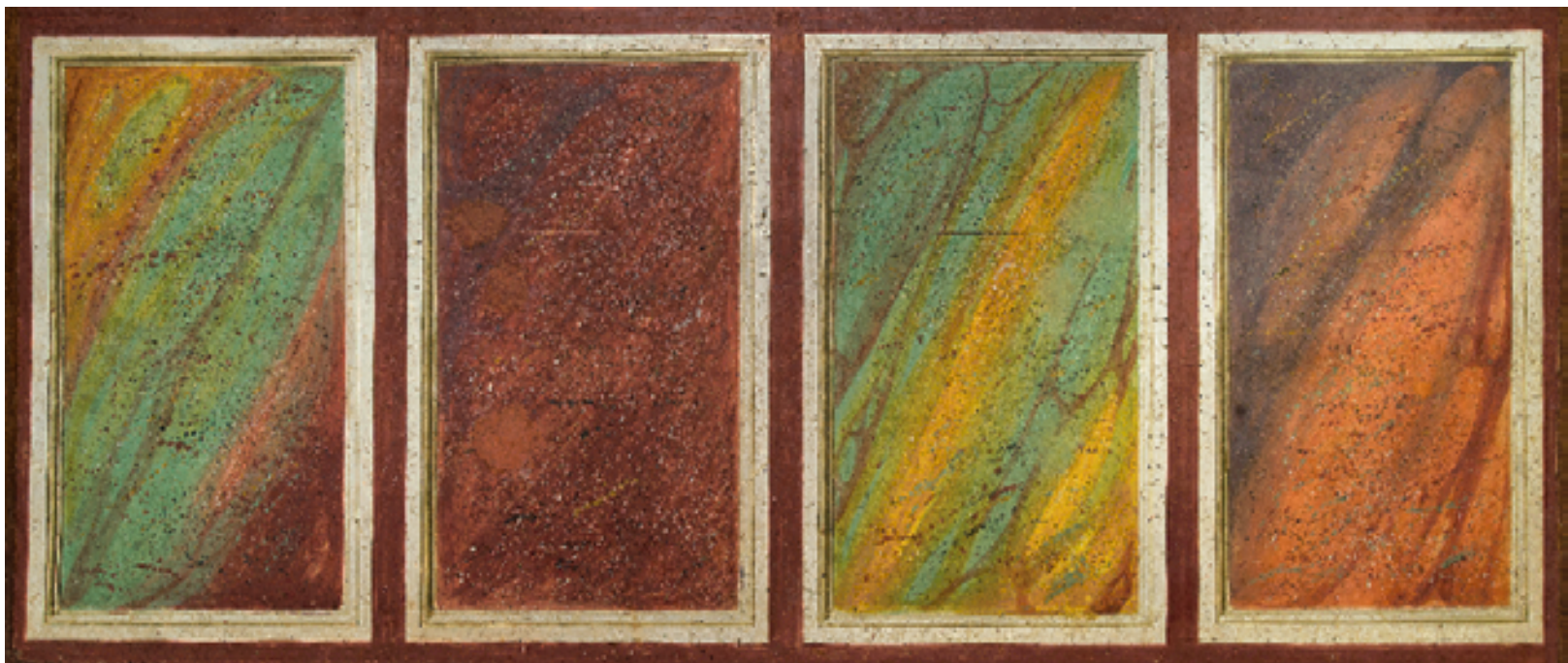


fig. 10
East side of Tomb No. 210,
Gaudo Cemetery, 4th century BC
National Archaeological Museum
of Paestum, Paestum, Italy

a more tangible species of *marmi finti* — the “fictive marbles” that Early Renaissance artists such as Fra Angelico placed amid the actual architecture in their fresco ensembles [fig. 11]. As the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has proposed, these motifs were, in a sense, literally modern color “fields” centuries before their time: in the terms of the quattrocento, *campeggiare* means “to color the field [*campo*] of the painting.”⁵⁸ They establish a venerable lineage for Marden's “stones” because their purpose might just

as well be his. They are planes for contemplation and memory (albeit of theological matters) that represent the unrepresentable — the spirit.⁵⁹ By no coincidence, Marden's *Homage to Art 14* (1974) took a reproduction of an angel from Fra Angelico and embedded it within an ambient “plane image.”⁶⁰

Finally, the painted marbles bring Marden's creative wheel full circle. Long fascinated by alchemy and kindred elemental mythologies involving correspondences between things above and below,⁶¹ his use of stone brackets the four elements — earth, air, fire, and water — that alternately fashion and erode rock.⁶² Likewise, the stones of Greece feature prominently in the series that was closely linked to the *Homage to Art*, the *Souvenir de Grèce* works. The word “souvenir” speaks volumes.



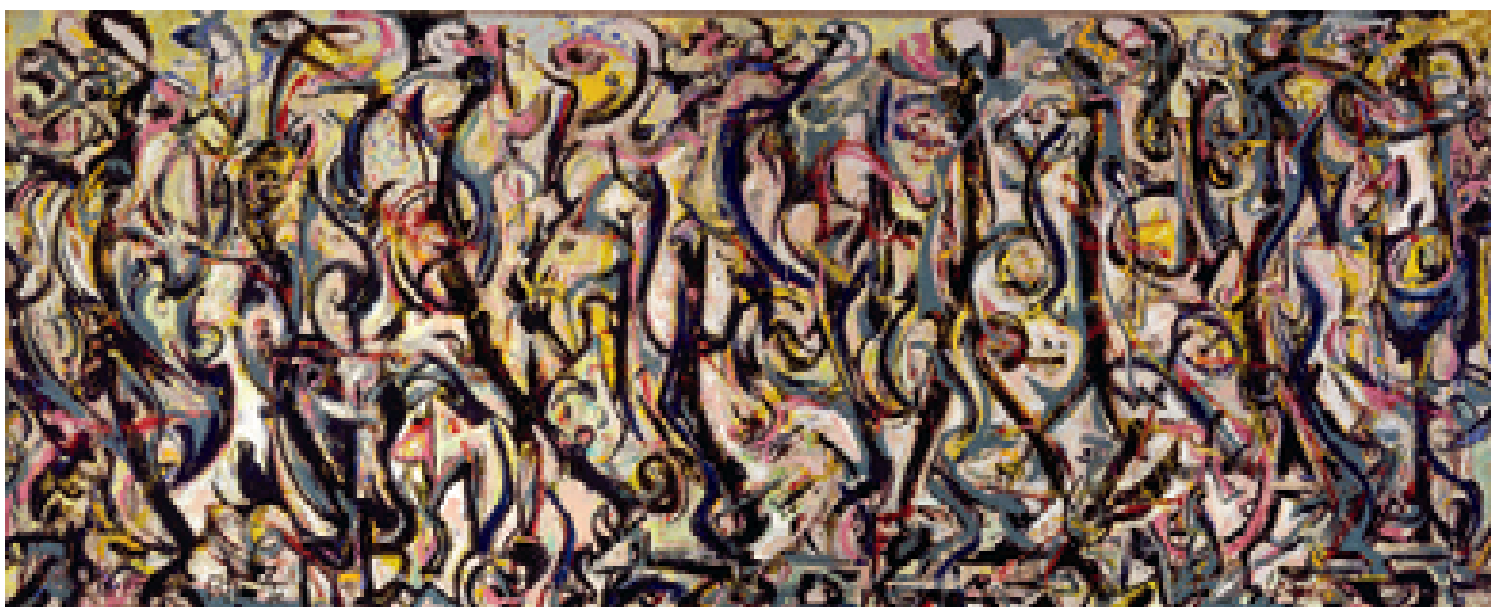
Intended not in the meaning of tourist knickknacks but rather as defined by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French, Symbolist, and other comparable artists — among them, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and his many *souvenirs* of landscape sites, Vincent van Gogh’s *Peach Tree in Blossom* (*Souvenir of Mauve*) and Matisse’s *Blue Nude, Souvenir of Biskra*⁶³ — the “souvenir” is memory pure and simple. That the *Souvenir de Grèce* series lasted for twenty years (1974–96) attests, as does much other evidence within Marden’s still evolving corpus, to the stately unfolding of his vision over time. Nor can a *souvenir* rightly be of something ugly, which would lead to an oxymoron. Rather, the *souvenir* embodies actual or perceived beauty, matters that touch the heart. Constellate memory, slowness, and beauty, and together these qualities perhaps summon one name in particular, Marcel Proust’s — with the proviso that some might add the English poet John Keats and his odes as a forebear of the same lineage. Let us end with that thought.

Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) is one vast *souvenir*. Like Marden’s art, its fabric is cyclical, a protracted process in which the same ideas and sensations are approached from

fig. 11
Fra Angelico
Madonna of the Shadows (detail)
ca. 1438–50
Fresco
Museum of San Marco, Florence

different angles. Indeed, we might almost say that Marden's work is a comparable *roman fleuve* for the eye (and neither is it happenstance that his drawings include studies evoking the flow and flicker of the surface of water).⁶⁴ Proust figures consciousness as endlessly stratified. This is why he too focuses on stone: "No fissures, indeed, no geological faults, but at least those veins, those streaks of color which in certain rocks, in certain marbles, point to differences of origin, age, and formation."⁶⁵ To Proust's "auditory hyperesthesia" Marden presents a visual one and, in equating colors with people and places, engages synesthesia.⁶⁶ What does Marden's enterprise fulfill on the physical level if not Proust's emotional request that "I ask my mind to make one further effort, to bring back once more the fleeting sensation. [...] And then for the second time I clear an empty space in front of it"?⁶⁷ For Marden, that "fleeting sensation" might be glimpsed in an Old Master such as Fra Angelico and his exquisite chromatic trceries, in the proportions of his wife's back, in the sunlit flutter of leaves in an Aegean olive grove,⁶⁸ in the thought of Sigmar Polke's odyssey, or the perpetuated tint of ancient Chinese Ru ware. Remembrance is all.⁶⁹

The Proustian dimension also clarifies why some of the shrewdest writings on Marden address the temporal issues that his work raises.⁷⁰ A corollary is the theme of psychically letting go, of forgetting or losing oneself in the sustained course of the aesthetic process.⁷¹ This dissolution of consciousness occurs in the celebrated opening scene of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, during which the narrator gradually drifts in and out of sleep, forgetting and reconstituting himself in terms of fragmentary sense impressions. For Marden, the creative impulse is



“like knowing yourself by forgetting about yourself,” and one of the things he wanted “to do [in the *Cold Mountain* group] was to lose myself in the same way that I lose myself when I am drawing.”⁷² In particular, it is the slow tempo epitomized at the start and the end of Proust’s *roman fleuve* (“When a man is asleep, he has in a circle round him the chain of the hours [...] and, at the moment of waking, he will have no idea of the time”)⁷³ that Marden has made his own. This is the genius of his misprision of Pollock. Whereas Pollock’s whiplash line sped furiously through space, as in the great frieze of *Mural* [fig. 12], Marden’s lineation in *Polke Letter* unfurls across the visual field like the melody in an adagio, curling back constantly upon itself so that it could not possibly accelerate even if it wished to do so, endless Möbius strips pressed flat into dreamy, lovely, fleeting traces.⁷⁴ Pollock conjured restless maelstroms; Marden weaves sublimely circuitous, beguiling snakes-and-ladders. In the final analysis Marden’s art stands or falls on a property that contemporary taste has questioned or even denigrated: beauty. His workaday motto might be what Ludwig Wittgenstein

fig. 12
Jackson Pollock
Mural, 1943
Oil on canvas
97 1/4 x 238 inches; 247 x 605 cm
University of Iowa Museum
of Art, Iowa City
Gift of Peggy Guggenheim

thought: when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.⁷⁵ On this score, Marden's ambition shares the same stately dominion as Keats's Grecian urn (in the ode of that name), that "foster child of silence and slow time," its visual music attuned to "the spirit."⁷⁶ The message that the urn conveys, through Keats's ekphrastic poetry, from its antique past into the questing present, affirms Marden's credo, "an artist's life is an intense search for truth"—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty."⁷⁷

NOTES

In preparing this essay, my special thanks go to Frederick Bearman, Brice Marden, John Murtagh, Joseph Newland, Nigel Spivey, and my indefatigable editor and former Phaidon colleague Craig Garrett. D. A.

1. Brice Marden, "The Grove Group Notebook" in Robert Pincus-Witten, *Brice Marden: The Grove Group* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1991), 16.
2. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time I. Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Vintage, 2005), 52.
3. With due acknowledgement to Willem de Kooning's quip, "I have to change to stay the same."
4. Marden, "The Grove Group Notebook," 17, 21.
5. The exact site of the kilns at Baofeng Quingliangsi in Henan province was only securely identified as lately as 1986.
6. This was reportedly the injunction of the Song Emperor to his workshops.
7. For the most recent *Letters*, see *Brice Marden* (Zurich: Thomas Ammann Fine Art AG, 2012).
8. Marden in Douglas M. Davis, "'This Is the Loose-Paint Generation': The New Painting Harks Back to Abstract Expressionism," *National Observer* (August 4, 1969), 20.
9. Braque's aphorism was the last of twenty collected and published by Pierre Reverdy in his journal *Nord-Sud* (Paris), December 1917.
10. Walter Friedlaender, *David to Delacroix* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1952), 72.
11. Interview with Pat Steir in *Brice Marden: Recent Drawings and Etchings* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1991), n.p.
12. Cf. Klaus Kertess, *Brice Marden: Paintings and Drawings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 15: "He [Marden] wanted an 'art in extremis,' and in his visual fixation on the plane, he sought, like Zurbarán, 'to go beyond.'" (Kertess, interview with Marden, June 21, 1989.)
13. Interview with Brice Marden in Janie C. Lee, *Brice Marden Drawings: The Whitney Museum of American Art Collection* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1998), 23.
14. These and other aphorisms, which have become mainstays in the literature on Ingres and beyond, were first gathered in Henri Delaborde, *Ingres, sa vie, ses travaux, sa doctrine: D'après les notes manuscrites et les lettres du maître* (Paris: H. Plon, 1870).
15. Marden (1978) in Dieter Schwarz, "Plane and Line: Structures of Drawing in the Work Books" in *Brice Marden: Work Books 1965–1995*, eds. Dieter Schwarz and Michael Senff (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1997), 25.
16. Richard Shiff, "Force of Myself Looking" in Gary Garrels, *Plane Image: A Brice Marden Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 31.
17. Friedlaender, *David to Delacroix*, 75.

18. Although the support for a majority of the paintings is actually linen, it is still common parlance to speak of “canvas” and “panel.”
19. Statement in “New in New York: Line Work,” ed. Carl Andre, *Arts*, no. 41 (May 1967), 49.
20. On compression, see Shiff, “Force of Myself Looking,” 62–6.
21. *Ibid.*, 74.
22. On the centrality of the body in Marden’s procedures, see Yve-Alain Bois, “Marden’s Doubt” in Bois and Ulrich Looock, *Brice Marden: Paintings 1985–1993* (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1993).
23. Hence Ingres’s famous anatomical distortions, which the extrusion, gravitational sway, and torsion of Marden’s glyphs parallel.
24. James Reginato, “Marden’s Retreat,” *W*, no. 26 (November 1997), 264.
25. Lee, *Brice Marden Drawings*, 13.
26. Marden (1966) in Shiff, “Force of Myself Looking,” 62.
27. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” in *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems: 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 194.
28. Brenda Richardson, “Even a Stone Knows You” in Garrels, *Plane Image*, 77.
29. Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism and the American Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 97–8.
30. On the merger of observational drawing with idealizing strategies, see also Deanna Pertherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 252–3.
31. Garrels, *Plane Image*, 16.
32. See *Art at the Rockface: The Fascination of Stone*, eds. Andrew Moore and Nigel Larkin (London: Philip Wilson, 2006), 88.
33. Marden’s titles have referenced adults (his wife), children (his own), and the departed (Janis Joplin).
34. See David Anfam, *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas — Catalogue Raisonné* (Washington, DC, New Haven, and London: National Gallery of Art and Yale University Press, 1998), 1 et passim.
35. Interview by Mark Rosenthal in Jeffrey Weiss, *Mark Rothko* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1998), 360.
36. Marden singled out this very painting, *ibid.*
37. On Rothko’s diverse technical effects, see Anfam, *Mark Rothko*, 84 ff.
38. “Notecards, circa 1950–1960” in *Writings on Art: Mark Rothko*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 143.
39. Nobuyuki Hiromoto, “Toward the Authenticity of Painting” in *Mark Rothko* (Tokyo: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 213.
40. Notes (November 20, 1966) in Shiff, “Force of Myself Looking,” 51; Marden in *ibid.*
41. Jeffrey Weiss, “Correspondence” in *Brice Marden Letters* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2010), 41.
42. The body — alongside its logical attendant, gravity — is a leitmotif that justly runs throughout

the literature on Marden. For an especially focused treatment of this theme see David Rimanelli, “Skin and Bones” in *Brice Marden* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1995).

43. See Garrett Stewart, *The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 329–73. Going beyond Abstract Expressionism, Stewart cites the illegible scripts created by, *inter alia*, artists such as Pablo Picasso, Cy Twombly, Henri Michaux, and Ann Hamilton. Of course, the look of Chinese calligraphy is also at least as important as the meanings conveyed.

44. Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Writing* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 27–9.

45. See Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

46. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 22.

47. Handwritten statement (ca. 1950) in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 24.

48. Lisa Liebmann, “Finding Marden’s Marbles” in *Brice Marden: Paintings on Marble* (New York and Göttingen: Matthew Marks Gallery and Steidl, 2004), 6; Richardson, “Even a Stone Knows You,” 79.

49. Richardson, “Even a Stone Knows You,” 80, 94–5; see also David Anfam, “To Fathom the Abyss” in *Anish Kapoor* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2009), 102; and Moore and Larkin, *Art at the Rockface*, *passim*.

50. Sebastiano Serlio, *Tutte l’Opere d’Architettura* (1537).

51. Anfam, “To Fathom the Abyss,” 100–4.

52. John Yau, “An Interview with Brice Marden” in *Brice Marden* (Zurich, Berlin, and New York: Daros Services and Scalo, 2003), 54.

53. Compare the horizon line or saddle framed by V-shaped plunging hillsides in Marden’s drawing *Greece Summer* (1974) reproduced in Schwarz and Senff, *Brice Marden: Work Books 1965–1995*, 70.

54. Yeats, “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” in *W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Pan Books, 1974), 150–1.

55. Photographs of Marden’s studio in Hydra in 2011 show that some of the slabs were originally meant to cover floors; see also Michael Duffy, “Two and Four Make Six: In the Studio with Brice Marden” in *Plane Image*, 128.

56. Marden (2004) in Garrels, *Plane Image*, 15.

57. Marden in conversation with the author, February 20, 2013.

58. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance & Figuration*, transl. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18.

59. *Ibid.*, 31, 56–57.

60. See Eileen Costello, *Brice Marden* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2013), 74, 76.

61. On alchemy, see William Zimmer, “Marden 1982: Hermeticism Made Visible” in *Brice Marden* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1982).

62. Glass, the medium intended for the Basel Cathedral project, is of course made from minerals: the ancient Egyptians called it “the stone which flows.”
63. Richardson, “Even a Stone Knows You,” 81.
64. See Shiff, “Force of Myself Looking,” 60–1.
65. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time I. Swann’s Way*, 223.
66. Although almost every writer on Marden (myself included) notes his use of terpineol, none (to the best of my knowledge) add that it is a fragrant alcohol, its odor similar to lilac, which is an ingredient of various perfumes. On synesthesia, Cf. Roger Shattuck, *Proust* (London: Fontana, 1974), 93: “Proust’s universe hangs together at the start more substantially by places than by people. [...] Each important place takes shape as a vividly experienced and basically stable association of light effects, smells, tastes, sounds.”
67. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time I. Swann’s Way*, 52–3.
68. Marden has his choice grove in Hydra. Proust had his favorite fictional grove of trees at Combray.
69. Cf. Marden in Jonathan Hay, “An Interview with Brice Marden” in *Chinese Work* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1997), 30: “I’ve always been very romantic about titles. I think about remembrance, and one of the things about visual art is there’s a constant remembrance.”
70. Harry Cooper, “Marden Attendant” in *Brice Marden* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000); Bois, “Marden’s Doubt”; Rimanelli, “Skin and Bones.”
71. Cf. Shiff, “Force of Myself Looking,” 65: “Marden’s ‘Lecture Notes’ include a second quotation from Thoreau: ‘Life is but the stream I go a-fishing in.’”
72. Marden (1991) in Shiff, “Force of Myself Looking,” 29; Marden in Costello, *Brice Marden*, 111.
73. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time I. Swann’s Way*, 3.
74. Cf. Roger Shattuck, *Proust* (London: Fontana, 1974), 120: “[in Proust’s prose account of a musical recital] First comes a slowly built-up deposit of successive playings, which he describes as ‘a volume, produced by the unequal visibility of the different phases.’ Later Marcel can project and immobilize the different parts ‘on a uniform plane.’”
75. Wittgenstein in Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.
76. Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Belknap Press, 1978), 282.
77. *Ibid.*, 283. Cf. also Denis Donoghue, *Speaking of Beauty* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 78–9: “What it [the urn] says is prophetic rather than descriptive. It is as if the urn, now that it has been removed from its historical setting, can speak of a time when Beauty and Truth will be one and the same because they will alike and equally be products of the imagination. This ‘time’ is anticipated by the experiences of reading, writing, and remembering.”



The ultimate aim of painting is not decorative
beauty but truth. What is truth? It must
not be confused with formal resemblance;
indeed formal resemblance only reaches the
appearance of things, whereas the function
of truth is to capture their ~~essence~~ essence.

Spinoza

This Is What I Do

BRICE MARDEN

*Yellow bark acacia, fever acacia, wet areas
misty white blue green, yellow greens
umber stems, yellow bark fever acacia
darker warmer greens, jades, umbers, soft yellows
white blue green up to dark blue green, dark
warm green.*

LAKE MANYARA, TANZANIA, AFRICA

*the title of the talk is This is what I do
 This is what I try to do*

*I've just been in Hydra, Greece, where there
is the tail end of the spring burst of wild flowers and
the return of some warming sun. In a walled garden I made
notes for this talk. Roses, jasmine, lavender
blooming. I was working a painting on marble, started
last summer. I was with my beautiful wife. We read
poems by Greek poets, drank coffee, ate fruit. Close
to ideal. I arrive here in London and find my notes
way too romantic, complicated, and confused.*

Things like “my embrace of the square” — infinite possibilities evolving into repetitious clichés — the belief in the hand (arm to body), so trained as it may be, can still deliver individuality, or through muscularity, express and deliver inner workings of the human with infinite subtlety — hand to human connection dance — inner expression brought out / the jasmine window — capturing the evocation, being about something not a picture of it. Detachment, transformation, is balance form? — perfect balance — to follow the dictates of the image / ambiguity — inquiétant — oppositional forces — opposites-equals — yin-yang acknowledged and allowed to turn into feelings creating an elevated sense which puts you back in touch with being human in this environment. Subject matter — I acknowledge nature and form as my guides — form as incorruptable — form as the incorruptable attainment.

*Stop the motion, freeze the energy, only to show the motion, keep it moving, retaining the energy. “Perpetuate the validity of vagueness.”
“Pictures must be miraculous” Mark Rothko
In the Acropolis Museum — the Greek light on*

the marble of the sculptures — it's working, everything becomes enhanced — the Peplos Kore — in perspective — in the distance. Giacometti — the specifics of her subtleties the light, the marble. Images quivering on the brink of becoming alive.

I like to work within given restraints — a given shape, a wall, a specific space.

I like number systems — I have worked with a grid of 4 and 3 — 4 representing the elements and 3 the Trinity

And I had a numerologist friend who told me my number was 6.

So I made a painting called The Propitious Garden of Plane Image (Plane Image is just another way I refer to myself or the studio or whatever).

The painting was made up of 6 panels — each with 6 colors, they were 4×6 — which is 24 — which is 6. I was beginning to feel this was some sort of ultimate self-portrait.

I showed two of them in a show at the Modern, in New York. I invited my friend Jeffrey to come to the opening, and he said, "Why was I invited?" And I said, "You said my number was 6. I've made all these paintings." He said, "Your number is 15."

So now I'm working on 15, I call them Stele paintings.

There was a poet named Victor Segalen, he was a very interesting guy, a doctor. It was he who bought all the Gauguins that came up

for auction in Tahiti. And he was an early Orientalist. And he wrote a group of poems based on these Stele, which were stone tablets they put up, inscribed with poetry or instructions on how to deal with your life. So I have five of these in three different studios, each with three lines of five characters. And I'm working on them in the different studios because I want to see what the differences will be by being in different places. So I have a group in Nevis, in the Caribbean. And I have a set in New York City. And I have a set upstate in Tivoli. They haven't gone very far. But it's a plan.

*avoidance of the givens. The square (the perfect abstraction)
always keep it a little off
acceptance of the given — my recent embrace of the square*

I had these extra 6 x 8 foot canvases around the studio, and I'd been doing these horizontal paintings, and I just turned it vertical, did a 6 x 6 foot square. And it didn't look square. And that became part of what. . . .

What I am doing now

*I am making a painting to be titled The Moss
Sutra — it consists of a large center panel*

*9' x 15' — 4 side panels 8' x 6'
each. The center panel is divided into 4 horizontal
areas, the largest being the center, which holds a grid
of 35 vertical lines of 5 “characters” each. I took this
form from a piece of calligraphy that an expert
told me was a Sutra. I love moss. A favorite
image is the Musō Soseki Dry Stone Waterfall
in the Moss Garden (Saibō-ji) in Kyoto, Japan.*

*The side panels are to be painted as the seasons.
Terre verte under all — season color — yellow green
red blue as ground color — a formal system*

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>a cycle of blue on yellow</i> | <i>red on spring (yellow)</i> |
| <i>yellow on green</i> | <i>blue on summer (green)</i> |
| <i>green on red</i> | <i>yellow on autumn (red)</i> |
| <i>red on blue</i> | <i>green on winter (blue)</i> |

then

*green on spring
red on summer
blue on autumn
yellow on winter*

all panels have all seasons

*through this layering, diverse drawing
opportunities will open up. (all layers are joinings
of “characters,” marks — my own fictitious calligraphy.
The layering process where the image reveals
itself by coming up — emerging from — positive
application (that’s where I draw something down) then negation
(which is I get the whole thing working and then paint over the
whole thing, scrape it down, and see what starts talking to me),
search, reapplication,
negation, search. (explain)
This is where we are now.*

The ultimate aim of painting is not decorative
beauty but truth. What is *truth*? It must
not be confused with formal resemblance;
indeed *formal resemblance* only reaches the
appearance of things, whereas the function
of truth is to capture their essence.

SHI TAO

—THIS TALK WAS DELIVERED AT TATE MODERN’S STARR AUDITORIUM,
LONDON, MAY 14, 2012

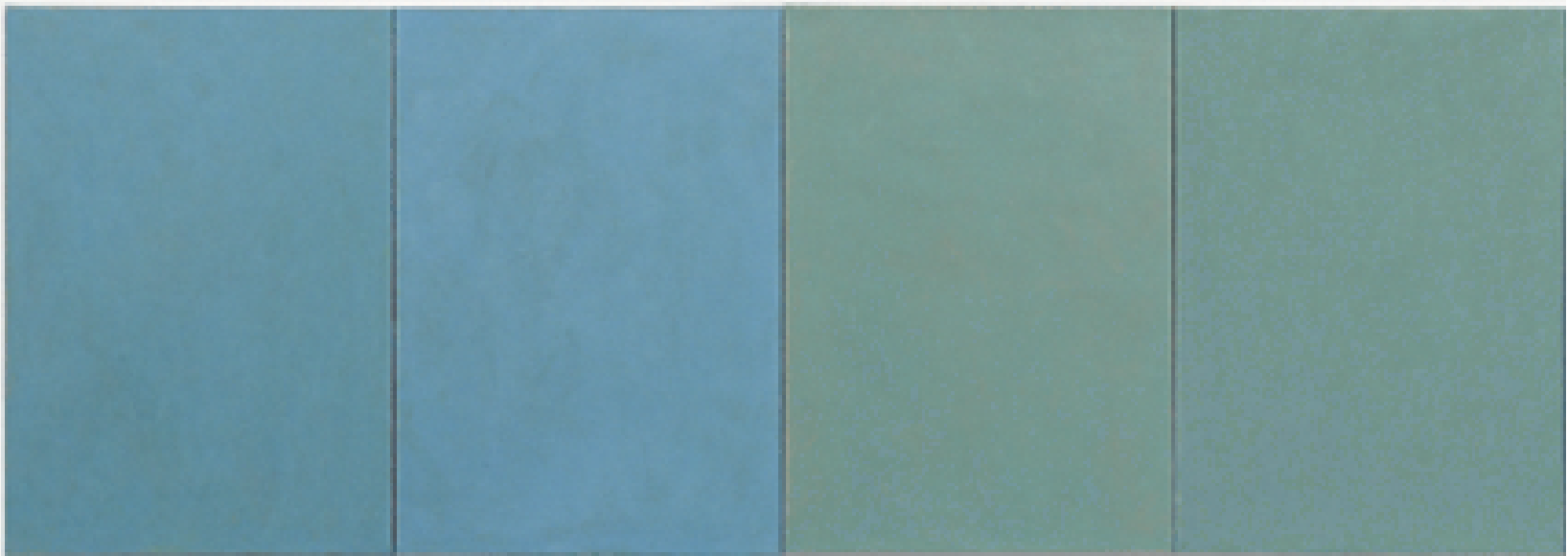
RU WARE PROJECT

Ru Ware Project, 2007–12

Oil on linen

Nine canvases, each 24 x 18 inches; 61 x 46 cm

Overall: 24 x 162 inches; 61 x 411 cm





PAINTINGS ON MARBLE

#9, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
16³/₈ x 15³/₄ inches; 42 x 40 cm



Joined, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
26 ³/₄ x 6 ⁵/₈ inches; 68 x 17 cm



Years, 2011

Oil and graphite on marble

25 ⁵/₈ x 6 ⁷/₈ inches; 65 x 18 cm



View, 2011

Oil and graphite on marble

31 ½ x 17 ¾ inches; 80 x 44 cm



First Square, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
15 ³/₄ x 9 ⁷/₈ inches; 40 x 25 cm



Chinese Landscape, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
41 ½ x 7 ⅞ inches; 105 x 20 cm



Swirl, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
10⁵/₈ x 9³/₄ inches; 27 x 25 cm



Formal Marble, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
28³/₈ x 25¹/₈ inches; 72 x 64 cm



#3, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
19 ³/₄ x 8 inches; 50 x 20 cm



For Blinky, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
29 ³/₄ x 11 ⁵/₈ inches; 76 x 30 cm



Helen's Immediately, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
19 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches; 50 x 80 cm



#10, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
23 ⁵/₈ x 15 ³/₄ inches; 60 x 40 cm



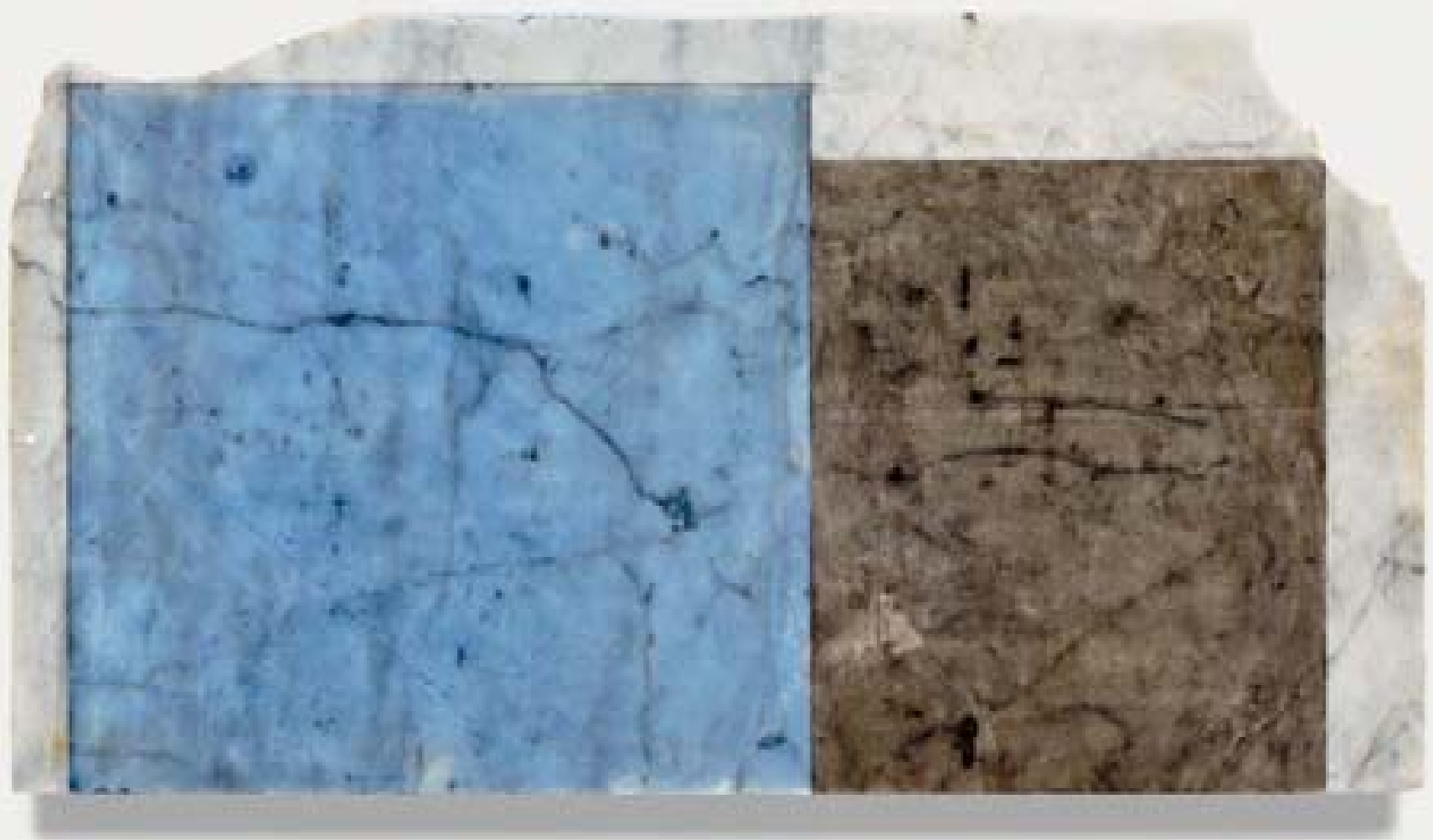
Chinese Landscape 2, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
35 1/2 x 3 5/8 inches; 90 x 9 cm



Years 2, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
21 ¼ x 11 ¼ inches, 54 x 29 cm



Years 3, 2011
Oil and graphite on marble
17³/₈ x 31¹/₂ inches, 44 x 80 cm



POLKE LETTER

Polke Letter, 2010–11
Oil on linen
72 x 96 inches; 183 x 244 cm



Brice Marden: Ru Ware, Marbles, Polke

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Matthew Marks Gallery
523 W 24th Street, New York, New York 10011
www.matthewmarks.com

Frontispiece and p. 35: Brice Marden's studio on the Greek island of Hydra, 2011